



"Thinking through my dinner with the invisible archivist"

by Ilaria Grando

for Thinking Through Things

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Thinking through my dinner with the invisible archivist

a text by Ilaria Grando

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“We live our lives in the middle of things. Material culture carries emotions and ideas of startling intensity.”

Sherry Turkle

A table set for dinner; about 20 people; and an odd set of plates, forks, and knives. No, it is not the beginning of a “dinner with murder” novel, but the rather unconventional setting chosen by my colleagues to launch the NNMHR project Thinking Through Things: Object Encounters in the Medical Humanities. Not a speaker, I write today as a participant of this performance of the archive, the object, and the researcher’s practice. A question of serendipity, a challenge to understand how to approach the archival collection and re-imagine it in its digital era, the panel, entitled “Archival Imaginarium,” enables me to enter a space of critical playfulness beyond the formality of my academic persona. Happily taking this rare opportunity, I want to use this account to start thinking through two things: the performative nature of the archive, be it imaginary or real; and the importance of the object-encounter moment.

As I sit at the table, without my phone, my notebook, and what very trivially characterize my persona, I accept to subdue my “researcher’s expectations” to what others have prepared for me. A little bit like the moment when one agrees to enter the archival space and leave all their belongings behind,

I sit at the table, accessing a performative space where my relation to a common object can, and to some extent, has to be subverted, prepared to follow a set of spoken and unspoken rules.

My companions in this experience are shifting their eyes around the room almost as fast as I am: somewhere between the embarrassed and the confused, they are trying to escape the inevitable centrality of our position and its performative nature. In front of each of us are a plate, either plastic or ceramic, and a set of fork and knife. Who has a plastic fork and a silver-plated knife next to a ceramic plate; who a silver-plated fork and knife with a plastic plate; and who like me ended up with a colourful plastic duo and a ceramic plate. On top of the plate stands in all its monumental grandness what appears to be the main course of our dinner: a greenish apple. We begin to joke: “We are guinea pigs” suggests a commensal laughing. “Do we get to eat the apple?” asks someone else, more practically. The domesticity of the environment we agreed to enter suggests a relaxed, convivial moment – are we indeed going to eat the apple? – yet the invitation to sit around the table, the attention that has been given to the setting, and the congress tag names we

are all wearing imply something very different. Is this the Archival Imaginarium mentioned in the panel title? And if so, are the objects on the table what the invisible archivist has picked for us? In doubt, I adopt the researcher's best behaviour: I do touch or move the objects I am being presented with, and having obtained permission, I limit myself to drink water. At this point two things are clear: 1) the glass will not be the centre of our analysis, and 2) the Archival Imaginarium is already in action.

The invisible archivist behind this curious situation takes the name of "Oblique Strategies", an approach developed in the 1970s by

Brian Eno to help creatively blocked musicians. Inserting the randomly generated words "MUTE and CONTINUE" in the Wellcome Collection online catalogue, the invisible archivist has presented the four panel-provocateurs, Dr Katherine Rawling, Dr Bentley Crudgington, Dr Jacqueline

Waldock, and Olivia Turner, with an image of a combined fork and knife, an object dated around 1914-1918. The tool, participant of the Western cultures desire to regulate an everyday act of survival, eating, is evocative of another story of survival, that of WWI soldiers, mutilated during the war and presented with an object, the combined fork and knife, that would enable them to maintain some sort of autonomy in the social ritual of dining. The slide with Wellcome Collection's photographic depiction of the object, the only proof of the object itself for the four provocateurs and their audience, reinforces its utilitarian character. As Rawling points out, the combined fork and

knife is not neutrally captured: the object is evocatively staged on a white ceramic plate, almost to perform one last time its purpose. The effect is striking. I look at the fork and knife in front of me, re-evaluating their function, my autonomy in using them, and their ritualistic value. A repetitive action, the act of dining, has been subjected to a normative codification for decades. There is etiquette, Dr Crudgington reminds us, opening their provocation: formal dining follows a series of instructions that we try to replicate with what is available in front of us. The action reclaims the materiality of the object analyzed and its common use.

Accessing the performative and ritualistic nature of dining in a different environment we are virtually attributing an archival photograph a tangible property. Yes, the sets of forks and knives we are holding are substantially different from the combined set evoked in the image: different materials; different shapes; different purposes;

and most importantly different values. Why then does the transferrable touch proves so effective? How is the Archival Imaginarium object encounter influencing the archived and digitalized image?

The answer to these question becomes clearer when Dr Waldock takes the stage and invites us to do what we have all been dreaming of since the beginning of the panel: eat the apple. As expected, we are asked to do so, using the sets of fork and knife we serendipitously pick. Immediately, I start to question my choices and good luck. Cutting the apple with a plastic set of fork and knife



is rather impossible. By a happy accident, the set I am using makes me feel like a beginner. I find myself unable to follow with dignity etiquette and social dining conventions: a piece of apple flies on the floor (I pretend it did not happen), a bit of water is spilled on the table (I cannot hide that). Time passes quickly as I try to concretize my desperate attempt, and ultimately fail. Waldock interrogates us on the difficulties encountered and asks us to consider the sounds we just made: the clink-clank of the cutlery of the plates could never replicate the single clank of the combined fork and knife, she says. In the absence of sound, Waldock has evoked the absence of the soldier's limb and the purpose of the object in the post-war world.

It is Olivia Turner to bring me back to reality, with a performative text that uses a bodily vocabulary, primitively and viscerally understood, to establish the Archival Imaginarium as a space of abstraction and alienation, sensation and limitation where researchers and archivists speak two different languages.

Suddenly I recall the words responsible for the invisible archivist's selection: "MUTE and CONTINUE". The performative action I was able to undertake through the Archival Imaginarium has serendipitously made me realize the pivotal importance of object encounter in the medical humanities. In the decision to mute the absent object reality and continue the conversation in a transformative exercise aimed at solidify a narrative otherwise impossible in the digital era, I had the chance to experience in first person that "perceptual dimension" of the object individualized by Fiona Johnstone (2018) as fundamental for an effective visual engagement in the Medical Humanities.

My dinner date with the invisible archivist was definitely a success, but sadly, due to the current state of things, it will rarely find a space to be repeated. Thus, I would like to close my record with an open invitation to the academic community. To you I say, go ahead and accept the invisible archivist's blind dinner date; or even better, create more situations for this date to happen. The Archival

Imaginarium and its serendipitous nature has much to teach us: it can help us entering the archive with new consciousness and inform our research practice of a multisensorial way of encountering the object and its evocative materiality that will change forever our way of doing medical humanities.

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